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An Insecure Nation

Inside the Kill Zone

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There is a park outside New Orleans with rows of old oak trees and the ruins of a colonial plantation. It is a pleasant place to take a stroll - and it would be an ideal staging ground for a terrorist attack on Chalmette Refining. An attack on the refinery, which has 600,000 pounds of hydrofluoric acid on hand, could put the entire population of New Orleans at risk of death or serious injury.

Chalmette Refining, a joint venture of Exxon Mobil, is one of more than 15,000 potentially deadly chemical plants and refineries nationwide. More than 100 of them put a million or more people at risk. These time bombs are everywhere, from big cities like Los Angeles to small towns like Barberton, Ohio. Many are so inconspicuous - a chlorine plant may be a couple of tanks and access to a railroad line - that the people in the kill zone do not even know to be worried.

The worst possible outcomes are chilling. A successful terrorist attack on a chlorine tank could produce, according to a Department of Homeland Security report, 17,500 deaths, 10,000 severe injuries and 100,000 hospitalizations. In Bhopal, India, in 1984, when methyl isocyanate escaped accidentally from a chemical plant, at least 3,800 people were killed and as many as 600,000 injured.

The security holes at chemical facilities are glaringly obvious. On a recent visit to Chalmette Refining, a Times editorial writer had no trouble standing in the nearby park for 15 minutes with a large knapsack. At two plants in Dallas that use large amounts of chlorine, the same writer parked a car on the periphery and milled about for more than a half-hour without being stopped. The fencing was minimal - far less than at a nearby automobile factory. It would not have been hard to explode a bomb or fire a weapon near the chlorine.

Nuclear power plants are required by federal law to have physical barriers and trained security forces, and to hold simulated terrorist attack exercises. Chemical plants should be subject to the same sort of requirements. But common-sense safety measures are being blocked by special interest politics. Chemical companies do not want to pay for reasonable security, and the industry, a major contributor to presidential and Congressional campaigns, has succeeded in preventing Congress from acting.

There is no way to guarantee that terrorists will not successfully attack a chemical facility. But it would be grossly negligent not to take defensive measures. The question Americans should be asking themselves, says Rick Hind, legislative director of the Greenpeace Toxics Campaign, is, "If you fast-forward to a disaster, what would you want to have done?" These should be some of the priorities:

1. Tighter plant security There should be tough federal standards for perimeter fencing, concrete blockades, armed guards and other forms of security at all of the 15,000 facilities that use deadly chemicals.

2. Use of safer chemicals Refineries, when practical, should adopt processes that do not use hydrofluoric acid, the chemical that is now putting New Orleans at risk. Some plants that once used chlorine, such as the Blue Plains wastewater treatment plant in Washington, D.C., have switched to safer alternatives.

3. Reducing quantities of dangerous chemicals An important reason that chemical facilities make such tempting targets for terrorists is the enormous quantity of chemicals they have on hand. The industry should be encouraged, and in some cases required, to store and transport dangerous chemicals in smaller quantities.

4. Limiting chemical facilities in highly populated areas Many chemical facilities were built long before terrorism was a concern, and when fewer people lived in their surrounding areas. There should be a national initiative to move dangerous chemical facilities, where practical, to low-population areas.

5. Government oversight of chemical safety The chemical industry wants to police itself through voluntary programs. But the risks are too great to leave chemical security in private hands. Facilities that use dangerous chemicals should be required to identify their vulnerabilities to the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Homeland Security, and to meet federal safety standards.

A bill being developed by Senator Jon Corzine, a New Jersey Democrat, and Susan Collins, a Maine Republican, could go a long way toward making these facilities safer. But it could be watered down, or outflanked by an industry-backed alternative sponsored by James Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican, that would leave many of the biggest risks in place.

Those who live near one of the 15,000 chemical facilities scattered across the country - that is, most Americans - have an important stake in this fight. They should urge their senators and representatives to pass a tough law that keeps America safe from the weapons of mass destruction hidden in its own backyard.

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